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The Spelling of the Pennsylvania German

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For many years I have been studying the various difficulties encountered by everyone who tries to write or to edit anything in the Pennsylvania German dialect. I have edited two books in that dialect myself and was therefore compelled to look out for a solution.

At the outset I wish to state my conviction that no solution will be found in the way of applying the English spelling system, for the simple reason that there is no such system. There is no possibility of deriving anything like a uniform system of spelling from the English language. For example. **"much"** and **"rotten"** (High German **"viel"** and **"faul"**) may be rendered as **"feel"** and **"fowl"** or as **"feal"** and **"foul."** Experience also proves that many wrtiers who use the English spelling are apt to borrow, occasionally at least, from the High German, and to write perhaps "fiel."

Then there is the High German system of spelling. Here our attitude depends on whether we want a system to be used by scholars only, or whether we consider Pennsylvania German a living language, to be used as a medium of written expression by everybody who is able to speak it.

If we have in mind only the records of a language which is dead, or which is at least doomed to an early death, we may well apply a system which is purely High German. For practical reasons, I should prefer to have no diacritical marks included, for the reason that the typewriter and many linotypes do not have them. We should resort to no artificial and unnecessary obstacles for those who desire to write Pennsylvania German.

We should also realize that the application of the High German system of spelling will always cover but a part of the Pennsylvania German vocabulary. There are numerous instances where High German does not furnish a pattern which we can imitate in Pennsylvania German. This holds true for instance where a long vowel in Pennsylvania German corresponds with a diphthong in High German (e. g. H. G. **Frau**, P. G. **Fraa** or H. G. **Teil**, P. G. **Deel**). Nor is High German spelling applicable where the vowel is short in High German but long in Pennsylvania German (**Osten** and **Ooscht**, Eng. east; **Anfang** and **Aafang**, Eng. beginning; **Fastnacht** and **Faasnacht**, Eng. Shrove Tuesday). And how shall we render the German "umlaut" in words such as **schee**, H. G. **schoen**, or **neemlich**, H. G. **naemlich**. M. B. Lambert, in his "Dictionary of the Non-English Words of the Pennsylvania German Dialect," usually doubles the vowel in cases like this, though he does not always do so. It can readily be seen that there are many words with regard to which we cannot rely on the High German.

As a matter of fact, there are today, and there will be for some time to come, numerous newspapers in eastern Pennsylvania, carrying a weekly and even a daily column in Pennsylvania German. Also the number of those who attempt to write Pennsylvania German plays is growing rather than diminishing. Few, if any, among these writers have had High German training. Therefore I, for one, believe in the necessity of establishing a simplified spelling system based on the High German. We must not lose sight of the fact that High German orthography is by no means consistent in itself. Let us take the sentence "The honest man found many fruits in the beautiful garden." Rendered in the dialect after the High German system, the sentence becomes "In dem scheene Garde hot der ehrlich Mann viele Fricht gfunne." This brief sentence contains no less than three inconsistencies. The consonant, after a short vowel, is doubled in **"Mann"** but not in **"in."** The long "a" (as in blade, shade) is rendered by **ee** (**schee**) and **eh** (**ehrlich**). In **"viel"** and **"Frucht"** we have two different letters for the same sound.

By closely imitating the High German system we should have to write in Pennsylvania German for long **a, e, o,** and **i** these forms, for example: **gar, paar, Hahn; Lewe. Schnee, ehrlich; Brot, Hoor, Ohr; dir, ihr, schier, kiehl.** That is, we have three and even four different ways of rendering one and the same sound. How can we expect a person who knows little or no High German to master the technicalities of this spelling system? We should not insist on seeing such tragicomic effects in the application of the High German system as **Hohr, Broot** and **Jor** (hair, bread, year).

In Germany herself, many dialect are being spoken besides the literary German. None is more wide-spread than the Low German. A year ago there was introduced in Germany a uniform system of spelling for the Low German. Among its main features is the doubling of the vowel to denote length. This occurs in High German too, to be sure, but as exception rather than a rule.

Despite the fact that all schools in Northern Germany are teaching and will continue to teach the High German, an independent system of spelling has been introduced for the Low German, though of course the fundamentals are identical. Therefore I think the best thing the Pennsylvania Germans can do is to render the length of the vowel by doubling the same. As shown above, even Lambert applies this method in many cases, where he can not rely upon the High German.

Without going much into details I wish to express the opinion, that a short syllable should be indicated by way of doubling the consonant which follows the syllable, but that the consonant should not be doubled if it forms the last sound of the word or is followed by another consonant (e. g. **wan, wen, man, Land**). This is similar to the English way of rendereing the consonant after a short syllable.

In conclusion I wish to suggest that "i" when lengthened should become **ie** and not **ii**; furthermore, that **f** should never be rendered by High German **v**, as in High German **viel**, but in Pennsylvania German **fiel.**

According to these rules the sentence given in a former paragraph reading: "In dem scheene Garde hot der ehrlich Mann viele Fricht gfunne" would appear as follows: "In dem scheene Garde hot der eerlich Mann fiele Fricht gfunne."

This system retains all of the basic values of the High German spelling but it can be memorized much more easily. In fact it can be acquired by anyone within an hour. However, while I am gratefully taking this opportunity of submitting some of my views nad experiences—in a very cursory way indeed—I am fully alive to the fact that only the practical demonstration can furnish definite and convincing proof.

As a further illustration I shall quote a few lines from E. H. Rauch's translation of Matthew VII:

High German Spelling

Geh nei darrich's enge Dor, far gross is's Dor un breet is der Weg as zu Ruineeschn fiehrt, un viel hot's as seller Weg gehne.

Weil die Dier eng is un der Weg schmal, as in's Lewe fliehrt, sin wennich, as's finne.

Hiet eich vor falsche Prophete, wo in Schoofskleeding kumme.

Pennsylvania German Spelling

Gee nei darrich's enge Door, far gross is's Door un breet is der Weeg as zu Ruineeschn fiehrt, un fiel hot's as seller Weeg geene.

Weil die Dier eng is un der Weeg schmaal, as in's Leewe fiert, sin wennich, as's finne.

Hiet eich for falsche Profeete, wo in Schoofskleeding kumme.

Perhaps some of the readers of the above will be induced to try out my suggestions for themselves.

(Nothing has so impeded the development of our Pennsylvania German dialect literature as the lack of a uniform, standardized spelling. Some writers have been governed by the English spelling, others have based their spelling upon the German, some have employed both, and still others have differed with both and written in their own wondrous way. But however they differed from each other, they had this in common, that each believed his to be the best. Mr. Heinz Klosz, Librarian of the Ausland Institute of Stuttgart, German, is an ardent student of our life and literature. He is the author of "Lewendiche Schtimme aus Pennsilveni" and "Die Pennsylvaniadeutsche Literatur." His recent anthology "Ich schwetz in der Muttersproch" was reviewed in the last issue of the FCK. Mr. Klosz has long felt the necessity of a uniform spelling and offers in the above short article a basis for such standardization.

—Ed.)